

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release February 20, 1976

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BICENTENNIAL EAGLE PORTRAIT OFFERED FOR SALE TO THE PUBLIC

A portrait of the bald eagle, the symbol of the American ideals of freedom, has been offered for sale to the public by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

It may be obtained by sending \$1.85 to the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402, and requesting the "Symbol of Our Nation" portrait, stock # 024-010-00408-8.

It is a full color, heavy paper reproduction, 8½ by 11 inches on a mat 11½ by 15 inches, of an oil painting by Fish and Wildlife Service artist Bob Hines.

The text which accompanies the centerfold portrait describes the historic symbolism of the eagle as well as its present day situation in the wild.

From the moment of this Nation's inception the eagle has played a prominent role. On July 4, 1776, delegates to the Second Continental Congress reassembled in the State House after dinner. They had signed the Declaration of Independence that afternoon and much was still to be done that day--the creation of a government, the conduct of a war, other tasks large and small.

That evening the Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson as a committee to bring in a design for a national seal. The need was considered urgent because inherited British custom and

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law demanded that the seal of sovereign authority be impressed on grants and charters to make them valid. Congress felt the need of a device to verify its actions.

The selection of the bald eagle as the national symbol did not please Ben Franklin. He thought the turkey gobbler would have been a better choice. He admitted that the turkey was a little "vain and silly," but he credited it with being a true native of America and a bird of courage--an attribute he did not confer upon the eagle. In a letter to his daughter Sarah he expressed his feelings.

"I wish that the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country; he is a bird of bad moral character; he does not get his living honestly; you may have seen him perched on some dead tree, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing hawk and when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish, and is bearing it to its nest for the support of his mate and young ones, the bald eagle pursues him and takes it from him."

Franklin further described the bald eagle as a "rank coward" and said that even the little kingbird "attacks him boldly and drives him out of the district."

Many have taken issue with Franklin. The outstanding American zoologist Francis Hobart Herrick wrote that the bald eagle is an expert fisherman in his own right and will not rob the osprey unless that bird is heedless.

He disputed Franklin's charge of cowardice. "The eagle is never driven from the neighborhood by the little kingbird or by any other living being excepting a man armed with a gun. To be sure the doughty kingbirds trail after him whenever he crosses their vigilantly guarded nesting preserves; hawks and crows may be suffered to do likewise . . . whenever the eagle is not too much bored to turn and strike them down."

History is generous in its judgment of the eagle and appears to be influenced more by the appearance and physical strength of the bird than with its natural habits which sometimes do not match the ideals of human behavior.

More than 3,000 years before the Christian era, the eagle was the guardian divinity of Lagash, a major city of southern Mesopotamia, near the head of the Persian Gulf.

The eagle was sacred to Zeus, god of the elements; shown with its talons sunk in a serpent, it represented triumph over evil.

To ancient Rome, the eagle was a symbol of victory and was emblazoned on the standards the conquering legions carried. It became the special emblem of Roman emperors and, after their death, the bearer of their souls to the stars.

The eagle became a Christian symbol of ascension and the symbol of St. John. It was likewise adopted as the emblem of Charlemagne, Napoleon, and Peter the Great. It was the emblem of the German Empire and the German Republic until the days of the swastika.

In the New World, the golden eagle was highly esteemed by all native North Americans. Daniel G. Brinton, an ethnologist, reported: "Its feathers composed the war flag of the Creeks, and its image, carved in wood, or its stuffed skin, surmounted their council lodges. None but an approved warrior dare wear it among the Cherokees, and the Dakotas allowed such honor only to him who first touched the corpse of the common foe."

The Natchez and other tribes regarded the golden eagle almost as a deity. The Zuni of New Mexico employed four of its feathers to represent the four winds when invoking the rain god.

In their idealization of the eagle, people have made it representative of power, courage, conquest, freedom, independence, magnanimity, truth, and immortality.

The world has 52 species of eagles. Foremost among them are the golden, or mountain eagle, which is distributed in Europe, Asia, and North America, but confined mostly to the Rocky Mountain and Pacific coastal regions of North America; the gray sea eagle, of still more northerly range and the American, or bald eagle.

The bald eagle is native only to North America. There are an estimated 1,000 pairs nesting in the lower 48 States at present. The species apparently mates for life. The parents are devoted to their young. The females are larger, as is usual for most birds of prey. The eagles build large nests, sometimes on a cliff but oftener in a tall tree, and use them year after year. New material is added each year until the tree falls or the nest crashes from its own weight. One nest observed by zoologist Herrick in Ohio was 12 feet deep and 8.5 feet across and weighed an estimated 2 tons. The female lays one to four eggs. The young are cared for at least 6 months.

The choice of the bald eagle as the American symbol appears to have been popular at the time. The "Bird of Freedom" was pictured on butter molds, blazoned on quilts, painted on chests, limned on gift plates, and used in many other ways.

The eagle first appeared in American coinage on a Massachusetts copper cent in 1776. The first coinage of American gold followed in 1795 in the form of "eagles," or \$10 pieces, and "half eagles." In the 1797 issue of those coins, the design was nearly the same as the national seal. Quarter eagles were coined in 1796; double eagles (\$20), in 1849. The first silver dollar, struck in 1794, bore an eagle with extended wings, standing on a rock and encircled by a laurel wreath.